

Jeannie Sinclair, OR, THE LILY OF THE STRATH.

Further evidence of the truth was abundantly forthcoming in the signs of desperate struggles which everywhere presented themselves round the mouth of the well.

They were crowding in upon the spot with excited exclamations, when the Sheriff, in a loud voice, ordered them to keep back.

The Fiscal, with the aid of one of the constables, made a minute examination of the printed marks on the clay, and though many of them were blurred and defaced by the sliding of the steps of the combatants, several remained perfect and entire, and these were carefully and accurately measured and cut out in paper.

The Fiscal, while engaged in taking the fac-simile of these marks, observed something gleaming among the grass, and reaching forward his hand, he found it to be a brass button, with the figure of a stag upon it.

A hush fell upon the multitude as they listened intently for any sound that might come up from the well, but all there was still as the grave, and the awe-struck faces paled as they thought of what was in all probability at the bottom.

After some of those present had been asked to take particular note of the appearances presented, the mouth of the well was cleared of the growth that partly obstructed it, and preparations were made to lower a burning torch down the circular cavity.

The torch was made, lighted, and fastened to a long rope, and the lowering began, as many heads being bent over the parapet to follow its descent as could make room for themselves.

The moments were moments of breathless emotion and dread expectation as to what the blazing torch might reveal. Suddenly one universal cry of horror burst from every lip, for at a depth not so very great, the torch was reached, and there lay, grim and stiff, a mangled human body, which they recognized as that of Sir Fergus Sinclair.

The bottom of the well was dry, and he reclined in a half-sitting position against the side, his face gashed and bloody, and something white in one of his hands. That he was dead was evident enough, but it looked as if he had survived the fall for some time, for the posture was not that of one who had fallen and never stirred.

Perchance hours had elapsed ere death came to release him from his agony, and perchance also, had he been spared, or, at least, he might have uttered the name of the murderer. But, alas, he was beyond this now. Cold and rigid he lay in the silence of death, and no one ever knew how great or protracted his sufferings had been.

The question now was—how was the body to be got to the surface? There was but one way of doing it, viz., by one of their number being lowered, and passing the rope round the dead man's body, by which means it could be drawn up. But who was bold enough to undertake the task? They looked at one another, and were silent.

'A sovereign to the man who will go down,' said the Sheriff, in a quiet tone. There was utter silence for some moments; then a voice said—

'I'll go.'

It was the young gipsy, and as he spoke he stepped forward, showing neither doubt or trepidation.

One of the strongest ropes was tied round his waist, and the end of it was given into the hands of half-a-dozen of the most stalwart of the group. With a fearless air he laid out over the parapet, and with the agility of one used to climbing he took hold of the rope with both hands and called to the men to give way.

In a very little he had reached the bottom, where the torch still burned brightly, and stood beside the corpse.

The end of another strong rope was now let down to him from above, and this he coolly and deliberately fastened under the dead man's arms, taking care to make the knot secure and trustworthy. Then he called out to those who held his own rope to stand firm, and he climbed up hand over hand with the ease and rapidity of a squirrel.

'He has a written book in one hand and a bit of cloth in the other,' he observed, when he was once more in the midst of them. 'The cloth is the colour of the clothes which Master Lynedoch had on.'

As he spoke, the torch was brought up, still burning, and after it, in a slow, cautious manner, the body was raised, and was soon revealed to the universal gaze in all its horrid ghastliness—bloody and cruelly disfigured. The face was so bruised and wounded as to be almost beyond identification, but the dress, complete in every particular, put it beyond a doubt that it was indeed the body of Sir Fergus Sinclair. As the gipsy had reported, his right hand clutched a torn fragment of grey cloth, while in the left was a pocket-book, open at the tablets, and on these few lines were written in pencil. The Fiscal took the book with difficulty from the dead man's grasp, and was able to decipher the following:—

'I have been murdered by my cousin, Lynedoch Sinclair. On this day, October 14th, 18—, he came upon me as I sat on the well, and avowed his purpose of killing me. The pain is agonising, excruciating, and shooting along the nerves like a shock of electricity, frequently feeling as if red hot wire were thrust into the parts, and after the pain passes away, a numbness remains for awhile. At these times, instead of attacking suddenly, it comes with a slight heat, or sense of itching or numbness, which augments in severity more or less rapidly. The pain increases from time to time until it becomes almost unbearable. Dr. Briggs's Alleviator is a positive remedy. Sold by E. Harvey & Co., Guelph, and druggists and country merchants every where.'

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